

Troubleshooting: Dealing with Common Writing Problems

by April Kelley

Word Choice

Problem: The vocabulary is too simple, too general, too vague.

Strategies:

1. **Hunt for striking words.** Share passages that use words that help make movies in our minds. An example might be Margaret Atwood's word choice in *Alias Grace* (1996), "Dora is stout and pudding-faced, with a small downturned mouth like that of a disappointed baby. Her large black eyebrows meet over her nose, giving her a permanent scowl that expresses a sense of disapproving outrage" (p. 57).
2. **Identify "tired" words.** The following words might need a permanent rest: fun, awesome, great, nice, bad, way cool, great, super, downer, etc. Ask the kids to help you brainstorm a list of these words and then as many different ways to say them as possible; for example, great could be high-minded, noble, humane, beneficent, magnificent, kind-hearted, just, fair, lofty, or princely. Create word walls for younger students and build your own dictionary of synonyms with older students.
3. **Read above (well above) grade level.** This is vital. When we tell students that they aren't ready for those books yet, those are the ones they want to read. Open up the whole world of books to all student.
4. **Learn words in context, not in isolation.** Language in context is far more powerful than language by list. We must teach it that way to help students gain a deeper understanding of the meaning.
5. **Predict verbal lifespans.** What words or phrases are popular with your students right now? Make a book. For each entry, use words in context, and write a short argument predicting whether the word will still be part of English usage in 50 years.
6. **Share your love of language.** Share your own favorite words with your students.

some ideas taken from "Creating Writers" by Vicki Spandel and
"Beginning Writing: Using the 6-trait Writing Framework" by Lori Jamison Rog

7. **Name it and practice it.** Use a graphic organizer to help readers focus on interesting elements of a text. It requires them to attend to the interesting feature of language, to name it and to practice it.

| |
|-------------------|
| Title of Text: |
| Sample: |
| Why I noticed it: |
| Name it: |
| Try it: |

8. **Million dollar words.** Encourage your students to be word collectors. Keep a bulletin board display of words and phrases that capture your attention. Create word banks of synonyms, concept words, theme words, power verbs, etc.

9. **Verbs, Verbs, Verbs.** Well-chosen verbs are one of the foundations of powerful writing. Teaching this part of speech in the context of writing is an important lesson. Play "change the verb".

Problem: Student suffers from thesaurus-chained-to the desk syndrome. Everything is overdone.

Strategies:

1. **Perform it.** Look up simple words in the thesaurus (e.g., slow). use the word in a sentence: "Jake moved at a *slow* pace." First try substituting some alternatives offered by the thesaurus. Then eliminate the need for adjectives by making the verb stronger.

- Jake moved at a tortoiselike pace. (Jake crept.)
- Jake moved at a leisurely pace. (Jake strolled.)
- Jake moved at a sluggish pace. (Jake inched along.)

Ask students to act these out. Writing definitions is nowhere near as powerful as performing them when it comes to driving home subtle changes in meaning.

2. **Enter the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest.** Begin by reading excerpts from *It was a Dark and Stormy Night*, or *Dark and Stormy Night: The Final Conflict*, or any of the zany, hilarious collections of what is considered to be some of the world's most overwritten writing. Give your thesaurus-happy students a chance to take a crack at this. You can try too. When you've had your fill of laughing at your overbaked results, send the best of them in to the contest:

Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest

*some ideas taken from "Creating Writers" by Vicki Spandel and
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Entries are generally only one sentence long and not more than 50-60 words.

3. **Keep it to one syllable.** This activity is harder than it sounds but definitely tames overwritten text. Ask students to write a paragraph on any topic (weather report, letter to a friend, summary of math lesson) in one-syllable words only. No cheating. "*The fog crept through the field. Sun strove to burst through...*"

Problem: *Too many modifiers!*

Strategies:

1. **Go on a modifier diet.** Put some students on a low-modifier diet.

Too many modifiers

The pickles were tart, juicy and crisp.

The clerk was gracious and accommodating.

Modifier diet

The pickles snapped when you bit into them and made your mouth pucker.

The clerk always greeted me as if I'd been gone for a month and he'd had nothing of interest to do in my absence.

2. **Spend adverbs frugally.** Adverbs are useful but should be spent like money. Never let an adverb steal work that should go to a worthy verb.

He shut the door forcefully.

She talked loudly and shrilly.

Her voice spoke to use alluringly.

vs.

vs.

vs.

He slammed the door.

She screeched.

Her voice seduced us.

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